

out & about

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Where Pumpkins Reign

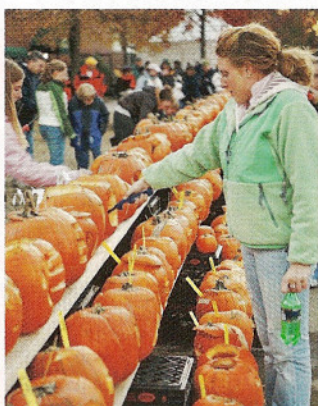
Each October, on one magical night, Keene, N.H. (pop. 22,500), triples in size, as visitors flock to see the thousands of jack-o'-lanterns that line Main Street. Since 1991, the Pumpkin Festival has set a Guinness World Record eight times for most lit pumpkins in one place.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RYAN BENYI | PRODUCED & WRITTEN BY DEBORAH GEIGIS BERRY



Few can resist the crooked smile of a jack-o'-lantern. That was the thought behind Keene, N.H.'s first Pumpkin Festival, when 600 pumpkins lured a few hundred folks downtown in 1991. The very next year, the event set a Guinness World Record for "most lit jack-o'-lanterns in one place" (1,628). Keene has broken its own records seven times since. But even though the 2006 tally fell short of the 28,952 jacks needed to establish a new high, Pumpkin Fest's appeal only increases. "We've had visitors from as far away as Austria," says Suzanne Woodward of Center Stage, the non-profit agency that runs the event. "They come to experience our small-town charm." Last year, area schoolchildren carved 10,000 pumpkins and successfully lobbied the state legislature to designate the pumpkin the state fruit. More than 800 volunteers stacked pumpkins on towers, recorded entries in log books, and managed seed-spitting contests. Though several rival festivals (most notably in Boston) have sprouted up in New England, Woodward isn't concerned. "There are bigger festivals than ours, but no one can duplicate our spirit."

Keene's Pumpkin Fest isn't just about making and breaking world records—it's about traveling to the country on a frosty night when a small town glows with goodwill.

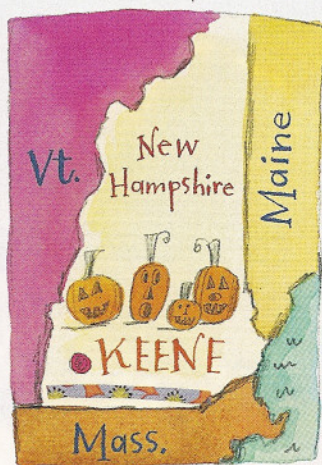


ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Young visitors sport face paint and march down Main Street in the children's costume parade. The festival enlists 100 official lighters—and dozens of enthusiastic visitors—to illuminate the candles in thousands of jack-o'-lanterns prior to the official tally, which is conducted by accountants from local firm Lehman, Wilkinson & Oster. At the Pumpkin Festival's carving stations, families can create masterpieces on the spot. Designs range from classic jacks with crooked smiles to elaborate orbs embellished with animals, flowers, vegetables, and stencils.

After dark, four scaffolds holding some 1,000 pumpkins each become community message boards glowing with expressions of school and civic pride—and true love. One man even carved a marriage proposal, seen by 70,000 spectators, including his beloved. In fairy-tale fashion, she accepted.



PUMPKIN PIE IS JUST FOR STARTERS. Tinged the color of an autumn sunset, whoopie pies, homemade fudge, and ice cream are just a few of the pumpkin-infused treats that help visitors savor the local flavor. During Pumpkin Fest, the hearty tang of New Hampshire's official state fruit also laces bisque, bread, cannoli, and cheesecake. What else is on tap? Why pumpkin ale, of course, made by several regional breweries, including Smuttynose in Portsmouth. And at Keene's E.F. Lane Hotel, "the pumpkin martinis are so popular, they're on the menu all year," says innkeeper Denise Meadows.



travel tips

Free to all, the 2007 Pumpkin Festival will be held Saturday, October 20 in Keene, N.H., located 115 miles northwest of Boston. Keene's 360 guest rooms often book a year out, so consider staying in Manchester, Nashua, or Concord—cities all within an hour's drive of the festival (see visitnh.gov

for a lodging list). The E.F. Lane Hotel, Keene's only downtown hotel, sits in the thick of the action and charges \$289 nightly (with a two-night minimum). Currently, the waiting list contains about 75 names. "We still encourage visitors to call," says innkeeper Denise Meadows. "You can get lucky." During the festival, downtown is largely blocked off for pedestrians, so park in a designated lot (\$5) and take the free shuttle. The cutoff for registering jack-o'-lanterns for inclusion in the official count is 6:00 P.M. on October 20. Fireworks begin at 8:30 P.M. For details, visit pumpkinfestival.org or centerstagenh.com. For more Pumpkin Fest photos, please visit countryliving.com/keenepumpkin.